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ABSTRACT

Play and games are happening-units or behavior-sets of a relatively closed character in space and time. They are distant to the needs and the reality of usual life and follow internal rules. Any game or instance of play requires freedom from external restraints and pressures. Freedom from external restraints and seeking for inner tensions form a first polarity of characteristics in play; in every instance of play a balance must be found between them. The attraction of play and games secondly depends on the fact that their course cannot be predicted with certainty. In play, a balance must be found between the relatively closed character of a play-unit and its inner openness into uncertainty and suspense. A third characteristic of playing movements is founded in their peculiar time-structure: they do not struggle primarily for future and other aims, but find their performance in presence. A balance must be found by players and spectators between the transitoriness of the moment and the infinity of playful fascinations. Finally, play and playing movements are distant from "real life" in being fulfilled on a figurative or symbolic level. Performance and enjoyment of play requires a balance, however unstable, between reality and appearance. (Implications for anthropological study and educational importance of play are briefly discussed.) (RH)

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Some phenomenological aspects of play

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What is play - and what is it not ? The answer depends on lingual pre-understanding, on phenomena which are called into our consciousness when using our mother tongue.

Words like "play" and "game" (French: "jouer", "jeu"; Dutch: "spel"; German: "spielen", "Spiel") are expressions of our native languages but not yet scientific terms. They are more suitable for evoking vivid associations of ideas and figurative metaphors then for differentiating marks of definitions.

But they took possession of our consciousness long before we could define scientific concepts. And therefore we have to take them seriously. The problem only is, how to bring scientific terms and concepts into a distinct and understandable relationship with this lingual pre-understanding.

In most european languages verbs like "to play", "jouer" or "spielen" are used both: as transitive and as intransitive verbs:

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- Intransitively we say for example that "the sunlight plays on the waves" or that "the grasses, reeds or blades are playing in the wind". There is no subject aiming at something, but only some effortless movement: an up and down, a to and fro, a back and forth; pleasing phenomena with sometimes calming sometimes exciting character, mostly a mixture of both; movements with endless recurrences but never creating exactly the same configuration twice.
- The same verb transitively used - "I am playing something" (for example chess or a ball-game or a sonata) - characterizes the doing of players, who produce playing movements with things, instruments or other persons and with very various kinds of reasons: perhaps for their own enjoyment or for that of other people; for pure curiosity; for self-realization or for commercial sport; with social, artistic, magic, therapeutic or many other motives.

Because reasons and motives and also the accompanying ex-pereances and feelings can be very different in different participants or spectators of the same game or sort of play (and also in the same player during different moments and phases of playing) - therefore let us look first at the characteristics of playing movements themselves, wherever we find them by following our languages.

Plays and games are happening-units or behavior-sets of a relatively closed character in space and time. They are distant to the needs and the reality of usual life and they follow their own internal rules. And this in multiple respects:

1. **Any game or play firstly requires a certain freedom ~~from~~ from external restraints and pressures. It needs a relaxed field,** free from direct struggle of life, from necessity, trouble, fear or danger. Players and spectators must have an opportunity to concentrate themselves undisturbed on the games and playing-happenings themselves: on their inner attractions, excitations or relaxions, their movements and figures and configurations, their up and down, their surprising variations and nothing else.

   In this sense play is a free and purposeless affair. In other senses we still can find playing-activities nevertheless serving for other aims: perhaps the money-making of professional actors or the reduction of tensions in play-therapy. Everywhere in human life we know such manifold and multifunctional actions. But also money-making by playing is only successfull if it gets free from pressure and free from greedy search for profit; and therapeutical reducing of tensions is successfull only if the patient is able to become master of the situation within a playing activity, perhaps by dividing a big difficulty of his life into al lot of little tensions which are easily to handle in play-situations.

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So we must have or reach freedom from external restraints in every play in order to be able to find and to perceive the inner attractions of play-happenings themselves: the up and down of a ball-game or a stage-spectacle like the to and fro of a Balinesian cock-fight, a childrens round-about-dance or a card-play - if they are not gripping themselves for those who are engaged, they never obtain the quality of play.

Participants as well as spectators expect and look for these inner excitements of their play. And if this inner attraction is risked to get lost because playing activities become too hard and difficult or too easy and slight, then the participants try to reduce or to raise the grade of complexity in modifying the rules. For example, in Germany we have a ball-game called "probe" (test, trial), where a little girl or boy throws and catches his ball at first in a simple way, then in more and more forced grades of difficulty: between throwing and catching the ball must bounce on a wall, the player has to clap his hands once or twice and so on, or he must hop on one leg, close his eyes, turn round his axis and so on ; some children get real artists by inviting still new forms of differentiations and tricks in order to raise the attractions and suprises of this play.

So <u>freedom from external restraints</u> and at the same time <u>seeking for inner tensions</u> are forming a first polarity of characteristics in plays: In every play we must find and obtain a balance between them.

2. The attraction of plays and games secondly depends on the fact that we cannot predict their course with certainty in a rectilinear way. Where plays become linear and definite, their charme is finished. They are characterized by their <u>ambiguity</u> and <u>openness</u>. A match between partners or teams

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of very different abilities promises no excitement, no up and down - not in ping-pong or in football, not in chess or cock-fighting. Also the ritualized childrens round-about-dances, where all steps and actions are determined by verses and figures and songs, - also they have an exciting ambiguity and openness for the child, who knows the "Black Mary" coming to him in the next moment. And even the wind playing with waves or blades would lose its playing character at the same moment, when the to and fro with its open and ambivalent character passes over to a linear movement without resistances, variations and counter-movements, without surprises; when playing movement passes over into a streaming movement.

So ambiguity and openness are the second typical characteristics of playing. Also in this respect in every play there has to be found and to obtain a balance: the balance between the relatively closed character of a play-unit in distance to every-day-reality and on the other hand its inner openness into uncertainty and suspense.

3. A third characteristic of playing movements is founded in their peculiar time-structure: They do not struggle primarly for future and other aims like a business or labor, which has to be done and finished, but they find their performance in presence. Here and now it has to be exciting or funny or solemn and important; here and now we want to know, who has to show or to offer something; here and now we wish to enjoy all surprises. The end is coming always more or less from the outside: we get hungry or tired, we have to execute an arrangement about play-time or the number of points, which could be reached. But the tendence of the playing-movement itself would continue the up and down and its surprises into infinity or in endless recurrences like the standing movement of waves in the surf on a shore.

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This characteristic mark plays have in common with esthetic phenomena: The french poet and philosopher Paul Valéry called it (within his "Pièces sur l'Art", Paris 1934) "l'infinie esthétique" - an inner infinity, which gives to the present moment an own fascinating dimension, and which requires again of players as well as spectators a balance to be found and to be obtained between the transitoriness of the moment and the infinity of playful fascinations: While playing we forget the time.

4. At last plays and playing movements are detached from purposes and from the continuity of daily life in fulfilling themselves on an own figurative or symbolic level. They are not the "real life" and they mostly remain without real consequences for serious existence (factual results for example of an economic, therapeutic or pedagogical kind in the sense of the above mentioned manifold or multi-functional actions are not excluded - so long as they do not disturb the figurative character of a play). The German poet Friedrich Schiller (in his "Letters on esthetic education of men" 1793/94) has called this special freedom of play the "Freiheit in der Erscheinung" (freedom within appearance, not within material reality). You see, play-phenomena are elements of a very fragil, dissolving and endangered substance. When we are playing or enjoying a play as spectators we are always skating on thin ice and we must obtain again an unstable balance between reality and appearance.

So what our laguages call " play " ("spel", "Spiel", "jeu" etc.) is a typical shape of movement which can be characterized by an handful of marks:

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Play is

- an effortless movement of an up and down, a to and fro
- in freedom from outward compulsions,
- but exciting and attractive in itself because of its own inner tensions, its ambiguity and openness,
- fulfilled in presence with a tendence to infinity
- in distance to usual reality on a figurative or symbolic level.

Now we could play with these few marks, we could begin to number and to arrange and put them into an order, to bring them into a system or hierarchy. And in most theories about play this handful of marks (or a similar which differs a little in the formulation of the terms) could be found again. All definitions which shall pass over on this simple lingual characteristics have got the purpose to differentiate the different groups of plays or the special perspectives of different sciences but are not suitable for total generalizations.

In an anthropological sense play phenomena become interesting always at that point, where acting or responding subjects (persons or groups) engage themselves in playing events: when they let themselves fascinate as viewers on a spectacle (a rolling ball, a match or a drama) or when they try not only to initiate and to lead through such phenomena with inventiveness, phantasy and activity but also to ensure the games and to make them repeatable by rules, arrangements of roles, ritualizations and material utensils like toys, chessboards, play-equipments and so on. Though attitudes, habits, forms of activities, motives and feelings, and also materializations in cultural history on the one hand are full of parallels between peoples and epochs, on the other hand they can be at the same time extremely different and multiform within the same culture. An unique theory which could be generalized for all forms and groups of plays seems me to be impossible.

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Also about the educational importance of play here could be made only some statements in general: If play as just described have an own reality of peculiar attractions and rules so not pedagogues themselves are those who procure and arrange the impressions and experiences of players or spectators, but the respective play itself. So a restrained, non-directive attitude of educationer - who tries to animate and to encourage and not to order or to intervene (apart from cases of need) - promises the most promoting and helpful effects in play-education as well as in play-therapy.

Plays and games are an opportunity to free ourselves from any compulsions and pressures of life and to give ourselves into the mood of "playfulness" ("jouissance ludique", "Spielfreude").

But at the same time games have their own reality and objectivity with special laws and challenges. Thus the special quality of play-phenomena depends on their double-faced character: They challenge both - activity as contemplation, "doing" as "happening": the "doing" itself passes over into a "happening", a self-acting occurrence which goes beyond the players control, which transgresses the "doing"-impulse and which returns to it as a new challenge.

Only if we want it, if we are able to respond, if we are in earnest with it and take it serious as an own reality, - play can be a field of irreplaceable experiences and impressions without them our life would be poor.

Some publications of the autor about play and Play-theory:

Das Spiel, sein Wesen, seine pädagogischen Möglichkeiten und Grenzen. Weinheim (Verlag Beltz) 1954, 10.Auflage 1979.

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Zur Begriffsbestimmung von "Spiel" und "spielen". In: Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, 21.Jahrgang, Weinheim (Verlag Beltz) 1975, Nr.3, S.341-349

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